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FEAR AND LOATHING IN THE NEAR ROOM

LAST TANGO IN VEGAS

ALI

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FEAR AND LOATHING IN THE NEAR ROOM

BY DR. HUNTER S. THOMPSON

PART I

MUHAMMAD ALI BITES THE BULLET, LEON SPINKS CROAKS A LEGEND....STING LIKE A BUTTERFLY, FLOAT LIKE A BEE....WILD NOTES OF A WEIRD CORNERMAN

When I'm gone, boxing will be nothing again. The fans with the cigars and the hats turned down'll be there, but no more housewives and little men in the street and foreign presidents. It's goin' to be back to the fighter who comes to town, smells a flower, visits a hospital, blows a horn and says he's in shape. Old hat. I was the onliest boxer in history people asked questions like a senator.

—MUHAMMAD ALI, 1967

LIFE HAD BEEN GOOD TO PAT PATTERSON FOR SO LONG THAT he'd almost forgotten what it was like to be anything but a free-riding, first-class passenger on a flight near the top of the world....

It is a long, long way from the frostbitten midnight streets around Chicago's Clark and Division to the deep-rug hallways of the Park Lane Hotel on Central Park South in Manhattan....But Patterson had made that trip in high style, with stops along the way in London, Paris, Manila, Kinshasa, Kuala Lumpur, Tokyo and almost everywhere else in the world on that circuit where the menus list no prices and you need at least three pairs of $100 sunglasses just to cope with the TV lights every time you touch down at an airport for another frenzied press conference and then a ticker-tape parade along the route to the Presidential Palace and another princely reception.

That is Muhammad Ali's world, an orbit so high, a circuit so fast and strong and with rarefied air so thin that only "The Champ," "The Greatest," and a few close friends have unlimited breathing rights. Anybody who can sell his act for $5 million an hour all over the world is working a vein somewhere between magic and madness....And now, on this warm winter night in Manhattan, Pat Patterson was not entirely sure which way the balance was tipping. The main shock had come three weeks ago in Las Vegas, when he'd been forced to sit passively at ringside and watch the man whose life he would gladly have given his own to protect, under any other circumstances, take a savage and wholly unexpected beating in front of 5000 screaming banshees at the Hilton Hotel and something like 60 million stunned spectators on national/network TV. The Champ was no longer The Champ: a young brute named Leon Spinks had settled that matter, and not even Muhammad seemed to know just exactly what that awful defeat would mean—for himself or anyone else; not even for his new wife and children, or the handful of friends and advisers who'd been working that high white vein right beside him for so long that they acted and felt like his family.

It was definitely an odd lot, ranging from solemn Black Muslims like Herbert Muhammad, his manager—to shrewd white hipsters like Harold Conrad, his executive spokesman, and Irish Gene Kilroy, Ali's version of Hamilton Jordan: a sort of all-purpose administrative assistant, logistics manager and chief trouble-shooter. Kilroy and Conrad are The Champ's answer to Ham and Jody—but mad dogs and wombats will roam the damp streets of Washington, babbling perfect Shakespearean English, before Jimmy Carter comes up with *his* version of Drew "Bundini" Brown, Ali's alter ego and court wizard for so long now that he can't really remember being anything else. Carter's thin-ice sense of humor would not support the weight of a zany friend like Bundini. It would not even support the far more discreet weight of a court jester like J.F.K.'s Dave Powers, whose role in the White House was much closer to Bundini Brown's deeply personal friendship with Ali than Jordan's essentially political and deceptively hard-nosed relationship with Jimmy...and even Hamilton seems to be gaining weight by geometric progressions these days, and the time may be just about ripe for him to have a chat with the Holy Ghost and come out as a "born-again Christian."

That might make the nut for a while—at least through the 1980 reelection campaign—but not even Jesus could save Jordan from a fate worse than any hell he'd ever imagined if Jimmy Carter woke up one morning and read in the *Washington Post* that Hamilton had pawned the Great Presidential Seal for $500 in some fashionable Georgetown hockshop...or even with one of his good friends like Pat Caddell, who enjoys a keen eye for collateral.

Indeed ... and this twisted vision would seem almost too bent for print if Bundini hadn't already raised at least the raw possibility of it by once pawning Muhammad Ali's "Heavyweight Champion of the World" gold & jewel studded belt for $500—just an overnight loan from a friend, he said later; but the word got out and Bundini was banished from The Family and the whole entourage for eighteen months when The Champ was told what he'd done.

That heinous transgression is shrouded in a mix of jive-shame and *real* black humor at this point: The Champ, after all, had once hurled his Olympic gold medal into the Ohio River, in a fit of pique at some alleged racial insult in Louisville—and what was the difference between a gold medal and a jewel-studded belt? They were both symbols of a "white devil"'s world that Ali, if not Bundini, was already learning to treat with a very calculated measure of public disrespect....What they shared, far beyond a very real friendship, was a shrewd kind of street-theater sense of how far out on that limb they could go, without crashing. Bundini has always had a finer sense than anyone else in The Family about where The Champ *wanted* to go, the shifting winds of his instincts, and he has never been worried about things like Limits or Consequences. That was the province of others, like Conrad or Herbert. Drew B. has always known exactly which side he was on, and so has Cassius/Muhammad. Bundini is the man who came up with "Float like a Butterfly, Sting like a Bee," and ever since then he has been as close to both Cassius Clay and Muhammad Ali as anyone else in the world.

Pat Patterson, by contrast, was a virtual newcomer to The Family. A 200-pound, forty-year-old black cop, he was a veteran of the Chicago Vice Squad before he hired on as Ali's personal bodyguard. And, despite the total devotion and relentless zeal he brought to his responsibility for protecting The Champ at all times from *any* kind of danger, hassles or even minor inconvenience, six years on the job had caused him to understand, however reluctantly, that there were at least a few people who could come and go as they pleased through the wall of absolute security he was supposed to maintain around The Champ.

Bundini and Conrad were two of these. They have been around for so long that they had once called the boss "Cassius," or even "Cash"—while Patterson had never addressed him as anything but "Muhammad," or "Champ." He had come aboard at high tide, as it were, and even though he was now in charge of everything from carrying Ali's money—in a big roll of $100 bills—to protecting his life with an ever-present chrome-plated revolver and the lethal fists and feet of a black belt with a license to kill, it had always galled him a bit to know that Muhammad's capricious instincts and occasionally perverse sense of humor made it certifiably impossible for *any* one bodyguard, or even *four,* to protect him from danger in public. His moods were too unpredictable: one minute he would be in an almost catatonic funk, crouched in the back seat of a black Cadillac limousine with an overcoat over his head—and then, with no warning at all, he would suddenly be out of the car at a red light somewhere in the Bronx, playing stickball in the street with a gang of teenage junkies. Patterson had learned to deal with The Champ's moods but he also knew that in any crowd around The Greatest there would be at least a few who felt the same way about Ali as they had about Malcolm X or Martin Luther King.

There was a time, shortly after his conversion to the Black Muslim religion in the mid-Sixties, when Ali seemed to emerge as a main spokesman for what the Muslims were then perfecting as the State of the Art in racial paranoia—which

seemed a bit heavy and not a little naive at the time, but which the White Devils moved quickly to justify....

Yes. But that is a very long story and we will get to it later. The only point we need to deal with right now is that Muhammad Ali somehow emerged from one of the meanest and most shameful ordeals any prominent American has ever endured as one of the few real martyrs of that goddamn wretched war in Vietnam and a sort of instant folk hero all over the world, except in the U.S.A.

That would come later....

THE SPINKS DISASTER IN VEGAS HAD BEEN A TERRIBLE shock to The Family. They had all known it had to come *sometime,* but the scene had already been set and the papers already signed for that "sometime"—a $16 million purse and a mind-boggling, damn-the-cost television spectacle with Ali's old nemesis Ken Norton as the bogyman, and one last king-hell payday for *everybody.* They were prepared, in the back of their hearts, for that one—but not for the cheap torpedo that blew their whole ship out of the water in Vegas for no payday at all. Leon Spinks crippled a whole industry in one hour on that fateful Wednesday evening in Las Vegas—*The Muhammad Ali Industry*, which has churned out roughly $56 million in over fifteen years and at least twice or three times that much for the people who kept the big engine running all this time. (It would take Bill Walton 112 years on an annual NBA salary of $500,000 to equal that figure.)

I knew it was too close for comfort. I told him to stop fooling around. He was giving up too many rounds. But I heard the decision and I thought, 'Well, what are you going to do? That's it. I've prepared myself for this day for a long time. I conditioned myself for it. I was young with him and now I feel old with him.'

—ANGELO DUNDEE, *Ali's trainer*

Dundee was not the only person who was feeling old with Muhammad Ali on that cold Wednesday night in Las Vegas. Somewhere around the middle of the fifteenth round a whole generation went over the hump as the last Great Prince of the Sixties went out in a blizzard of pain, shock and angry confusion so total that it was hard to even know how to feel, much less what to say, when the thing was finally over. The last shot came just at the final bell, when "Crazy Leon" whacked Ali with a savage overhand right that almost dropped The Champ in his tracks and killed the last glimmer of hope for the patented "miracle finish" that Angelo Dundee knew was his fighter's only chance. As Muhammad wandered back to his corner about six feet in front of me, the deal had clearly gone down.

The decision was anticlimactic. Leon Spinks, a twenty-four-year-old brawler from St. Louis with only seven professional fights on his record, was the new Heavyweight Boxing Champion of the World. And the roar of the pro-Spinks crowd was the clearest message of all: that uppity nigger from Louisville had finally got what was coming to him. For fifteen long years he had mocked everything they all thought they stood for: changing his name, dodging the draft, beating the best they could hurl at him.... But now, thank God, they were seeing him finally go down.

Six presidents have lived in the White House in the time of Muhammad Ali. Dwight Eisenhower was still rapping golf balls around the Oval Office when Cassius Clay Jr. won a gold medal for the U.S. as a light-heavyweight in the 1960 Olympics and then turned pro and won his first fight for money against a journeyman heavyweight named Tunney Hunsaker in Louisville on October 29th of that same year.

Less than four years later and almost three months to the day after John Fitzgerald Kennedy was murdered in Dallas, Cassius Clay—the "Louisville Lip" by then—made a permanent enemy of every "boxing expert" in the Western world by beating World Heavyweight Champion Sonny Liston, the meanest of the mean, so badly that Liston refused to come out of his corner for the seventh round.

That was fourteen years ago. Jesus! And it seems like fourteen months.

Why?

Brain damage.

THE REAL STORY: A MEMO WITH NAILS IN BOTH NOSTRILS...

BY RAOUL DUKE, SPORTS EDITOR

THIS STORY IS BADLY BOGGED down, and I think I know the reason: Dr. Thompson has been on it so long—in the belly of the beast, as it were—that he has lost all functional contact with his sense of humor; and where I come from they call that condition "insanity."

But there are a lot of high-powered fools where I come from, and it's been about fifteen years since I took any one of them seriously....And in fact it was Thompson himself who originally made that connection between humor and sanity; which changes nothing, because we come from the same place—from the elm-shaded, white-frame "Highlands" of Louisville, Kentucky, about halfway between the Cassius Clay residence down on South Fourth Street and the homes of the men who originally launched Cassius Clay Jr. on his long wild ride on the Great Roller-Coaster of professional boxing and paraprofessional show business. They lived out in Indian Hills or on Mockingbird Valley Road near the Louisville Country Club, and they owned every bank in the city—along with both newspapers, all the radio stations that white folks took seriously, and at least half the major distilleries and tobacco companies that funded the municipal tax base.

They knew a good thing when they saw one, and in the year of our Lord 1960 the good thing they saw was an eighteen-year-old local Negro boxer, a big, fast and impressively intelligent young light-heavyweight named Cassius Clay Jr., who had just won a gold medal for the U.S.A. in the 1960 Olympics....So ten of these gents got together and made the boy an offer he couldn't refuse: they were willing to take a long risk on him, they said, just as soon as he gained a few pounds and decided to fight professionally as the new morning star among heavyweights.

They would finance his move for the title in a division that Floyd Patterson and his crafty manager, Cus D'Amato, had dominated for so long—by means of a new gimmick known as "closed-circuit TV"—that a whole generation of what might have been promising young heavyweight challengers had died on the vine while they waited in line for a chance to fight Patterson, who didn't *really* want to fight anybody.

Floyd was "The Champ," and he used that fact as leverage as Richard Nixon would later learn to retreat behind the odious truth that "I am, you know, The President."

Indeed...and they were both right for a while; but bad karma tends to generate its own kind of poison, which—like typhoid chickens and rotten bread cast out on the waters—will usually come home to either roost, fester or mutate very close to its own point of origin.

Richard Nixon abused karma, chickens and even bread for so long that they all came home at once and totally destroyed him....And Floyd Patterson's neurotic, anal-compulsive reluctance to get in the ring with anything at all with two arms and legs under thirty was what eventually created the vacuum that hatched Sonny Liston, an aging ex-con who twice turned poor Floyd to jelly, just by climbing into the ring.

...Hot damn! We may be approaching a heinous new record for mixed metaphors in this thing; the rats have swarmed into the belfry, and anything sane that survives will be hurled out to sea and stomped down like a dwarf in a shit-rain....

Why not?

It was never my intention to make any real sense in this memo. The Sports Desk has never loved logic; mainly because there is no money in it—and pro sports without money is like a Vincent Black Shadow with no gas. Dumb greed is the backbone of all sports, except maybe college wrestling—which may or may not be a good & healthy thing for some people, in places like Kansas and Idaho, but not *here*. Those knotty little monsters can write their own stories, and toss them in over the transom....If we have enough room or maybe a bad check for a half-page ad from the *Shotgun News* or the "Billy Beer" people, that's when we'll focus the whole twisted energy of the Sports Desk on a college wrestling feature:

UTAH CHAMP DROGO PINS THREE-ARMED COWBOY
FOR WEST SLOPE TITLE IN NINE-HOUR CLASSIC

How's that for a stylish headline?

Well...shucks; let's try it again, from the other side of the fence:

CRIPPLED COWBOY CHALLENGER FALLS SHORT
IN MAT FINALS; ANGRY FANS MAUL REF AS
MATCH ENDS; HUGE DROGO GAINS SPLIT WIN

Jesus! I could get a job writing sports heads for the *Daily News* with that kind of feel for the word count....Right, with a big salary too, in the core of the Big Apple....

But that is not what we had in mind here, is it?

No. We were talking of Sport, and Big Money. Which gets us back to pro boxing, the most shameless racket of all. It is more a Spectacle than a Sport, one of the purest forms of atavistic endeavor still extant in a world that only big-time politicians feel a need to call "civilized." Nobody who has ever sat in a front-row, ringside seat less than six feet just below and away from the sickening thumps and cracks and groans of two desperate, adrenalin-crazed giants who are whipping and pounding each other like two pit bulls in a death battle will ever forget what it felt like to be there.

No TV camera or any other kind will ever convey the almost four-dimensional reality of total, frenzied violence of seeing, hearing and almost *feeling* the sudden WHACK of Leon Spinks' thinly padded fist against Muhammad Ali's cheekbone so close in front of your own face that it is hard to keep from flinching and trying to duck backward—while a whole row of $200-a-seat ringsiders right behind you are leaping and stomping and howling for *more* showers of flying sweat to fall down on them, *more* droplets of human blood to rain down on the sleeves and tailored shoulders of their tan cashmere sport coats...and then, with Leon still pounding and the sweat and blood still flying, some fist-flailing geek screaming over your shoulder loses his balance and cracks you between the shoulder blades with a shot that sends you reeling into a cop hanging on to the ring apron—who reacts with a vicious elbow to your chest, and the next thing you see is shoes bouncing inches in front of your face on a concrete floor.

"The horror! The horror!...Exterminate all the brutes!"

Mistah Kurtz said that but the smart money called him a joker....Ho, ho, good ole Kurtz, that Prussian sense of humor will zing you every time.

I said that. We were sitting in a sauna at the health spa in the Las Vegas Hilton—me and my friend Bob Arum, the sinister promoter—when all of a sudden the redwood door swung open and in comes Leon Spinks.

"Hi there, Leon," said Arum.

Leon grinned and tossed his towel across the room at the stove full of hot rocks. "What's happenin', jewboy?" he replied. "I heard you was too stoned to be foolin' around down here with us health freaks."

Arum turned beet red and moved off toward the corner.

Leon laughed again, and reached for his teeth. "These damn things get hot," he snarled. "Who needs these goddamn teeth, anyway."

He turned to laugh at Arum again, and right then I saw my chance. I stood up in a sort of linebacker's crouch and hooked him hard in the ribs. He fell back on the hot rocks and I hooked him again.

"O my God!" Arum shrieked. "I heard something break!"

Leon looked up from where he was sitting on the duckboard floor, his face warped with pain. "Well," he said slowly, "now we know you ain't deaf, Bob." He was leaning back on both hands, wincing with every breath as he slowly raised his eyes to glare at me.

"Real smart friends you got, Arum," he whispered, "but this one's *mine*, now." He winced again: every breath was painful and he spoke very slowly. "Call my brother Michael," he said to Arum. "Tell him to fix a hook on this honky bastard's head and hang him up alongside the big bag, for when I get well."

Arum was kneeling beside him now, gently probing his rib cage....And it was just about then that I felt myself waking up; but instead of lying down in a bed, I suddenly realized that something ugly had happened. My first thought was that I'd passed out from the heat of the sauna: indeed, a quick trip to the Near Room and some dim memory of violence, but only as part of a dream....

Or...well...maybe not. As my head began to clear and Arum's face came into focus—his beady eyes, his trembling hands, the sweat squirting out of his pores—I realized that I was not lying down or coming out of a faint, but standing naked in the middle of a hot wooden cell and staring down like a zombie at—ye gods!—it was Leon Spinks!

And Bob Arum, his eyes bulged out like a frog's, was massaging Leon's chest. I stared for a moment, then recoiled with shock....No, I thought, this can't be happening!

But it was. I was wide-awake now, and I knew this hideous thing was actually happening, right in front of my eyes. Arum was moaning and trembling, while his hands stroked the challenger's chest. Leon was leaning back with his eyes closed, his teeth clenched, and his whole body stiff as a corpse.

Neither one of them seemed to notice my recovery—from what was later diagnosed, by the nervous hotel doctor, as nothing more than a mild Acid Flashback....But I didn't learn *that* until later.

HIGH RISK ON THE LOW ROAD, NEW BOY ON QUEER STREET...FIVE MILLION DOLLARS AN HOUR, FIVE MILES TO THE TERMINAL HOTEL....THE DEVIL AND PAT PATTERSON....NO NIGGER EVER CALLED ME HIPPIE....

THE NEAR ROOM

When he got in trouble in the ring, [Ali] imagined a door swung open and inside he could see neon, orange and green lights blinking, and bats blowing trumpets and alligators playing trombones, and he could hear snakes screaming. Weird masks and actors' clothes hung on the wall, and if he stepped across the sill and reached for them, he knew that he was committing himself to destruction.

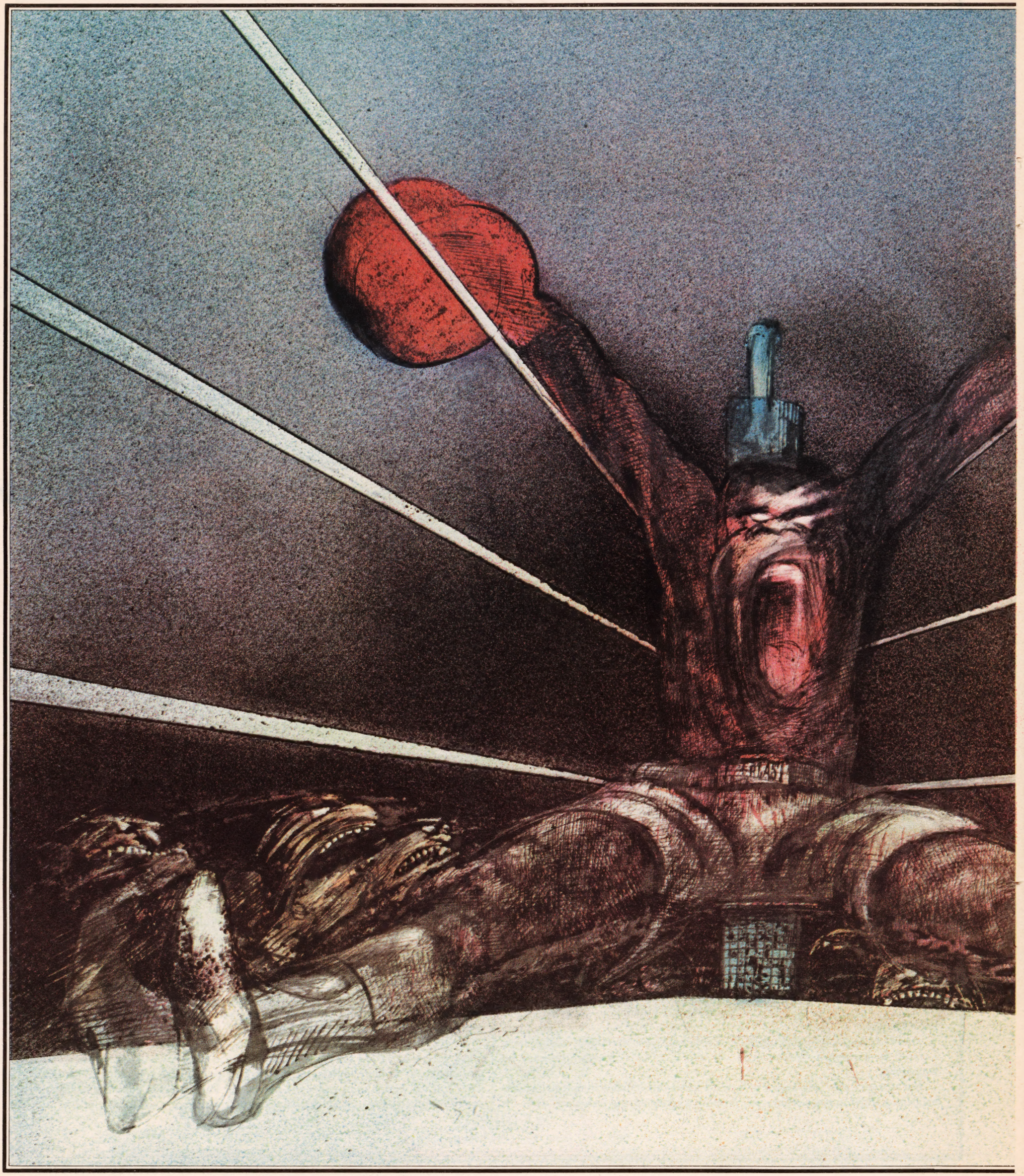
—GEORGE PLIMPTON, *Shadow Box*

IT WAS ALMOST MIDNIGHT WHEN PAT PATTERSON GOT OFF the elevator and headed down the corridor toward 905, his room right next door to The Champ's. They had flown in from Chicago a few hours earlier and Muhammad had said he was tired and felt like sleeping. No midnight strolls down the block to the Plaza fountain, he promised, no wandering around the hotel or causing a scene in the lobby.

Beautiful, thought Patterson. No worries tonight. With Muhammad in bed and Veronica there to watch over him, Pat felt things were under control and he might even have time for a bit of refreshment downstairs, and then get a decent night's sleep for himself. The only conceivable problem was the volatile presence of Bundini and a friend, who had dropped by around ten for a chat with The Champ about his run for the Triple Crown. The family had been in a state of collective shock for two weeks or so after Vegas, but now it was the first week in March and they were eager to get the big engine cranked up for the return bout with Spinks in September. No contracts had been signed yet, and every sportswriter in New York seemed to be on the take from either Ken Norton or Don King or both....But none of that mattered, said Ali, because he and Leon had already agreed on the rematch, and by the end of this year he would be the first man in history to win the Heavyweight Championship of the World THREE TIMES.

Patterson had left them whooping and laughing at each other, but only after securing a promise from Hal Conrad that he and Bundini leave early and let The Champ sleep. They were scheduled to tape a show with Dick Cavett the next day, then drive for three or four hours up into the mountains of eastern Pennsylvania to Ali's custom-built training camp at Deer Lake. Kilroy was getting the place ready for what Patterson and all the rest of The Family understood was going to be some very serious use. Ali had announced almost immediately after losing to Spinks in Vegas any talk of his "retiring from the ring was nonsense," and that soon he'd begin training for his rematch with Leon.

So the fat was in the fire: a second loss to Spinks would be even worse than the first—the end of the line for Ali, The Family, and in fact the whole Ali industry. No more paydays, no more limousines, no more suites and crab cocktails from room service in the world's most expensive hotels. For Pat Patterson and a lot of other people, another defeat by Spinks would mean the end of a whole way of life....



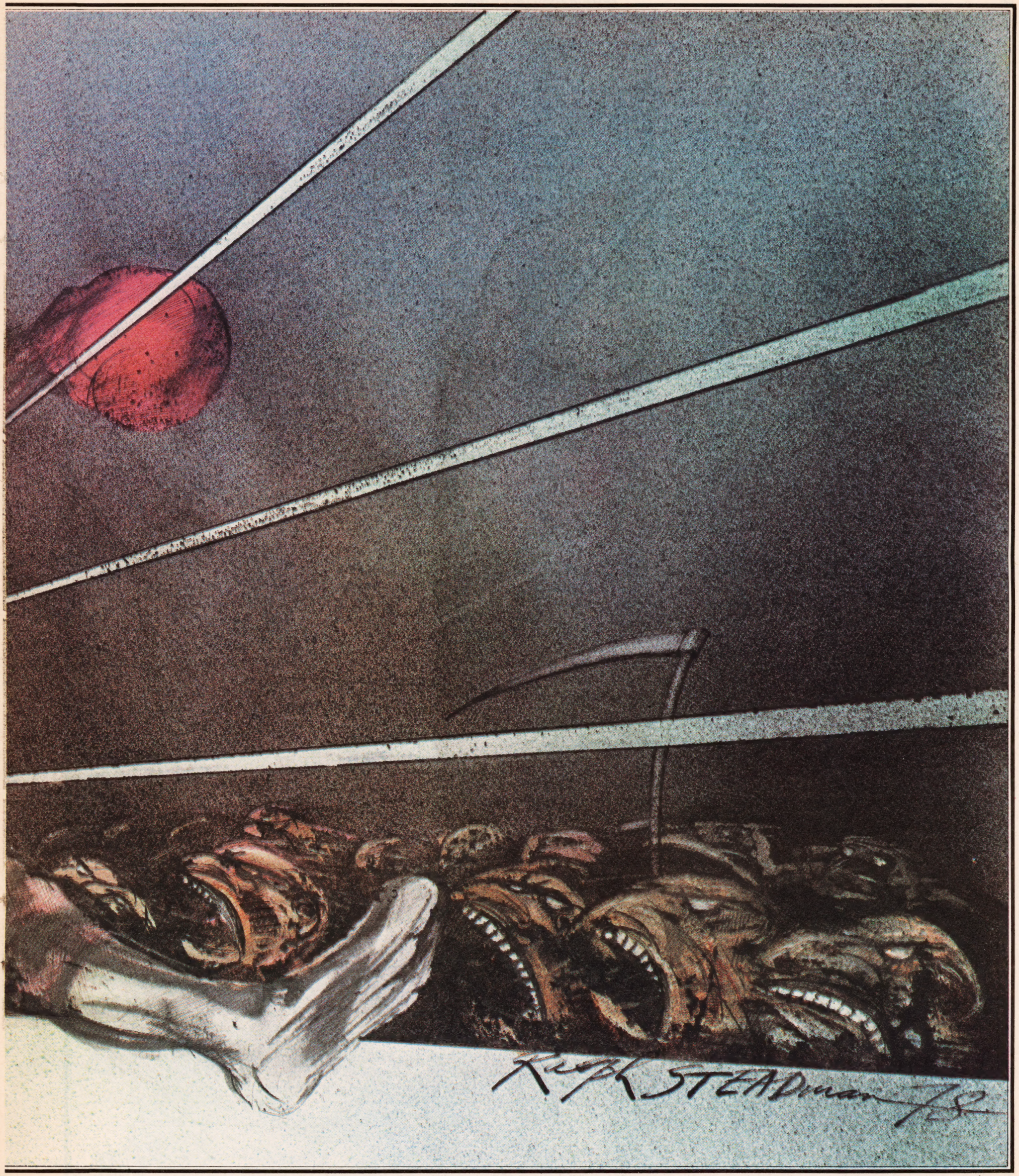


ILLUSTRATION BY RALPH STEADMAN

And, worse yet, the first wave of public reaction to Ali's "comeback" announcement had been anything but reassuring. An otherwise sympathetic story in the *Los Angeles Times* described the almost universal reaction of the sporting press:

"There were smiles and a shaking of hands all around when the thirty-six-year-old ex-champion said after the fight last Wednesday night: 'I'll be back. I'll be the first man to win the heavyweight title three times.' But no one laughed out loud."

A touch of this doomsday thinking had even showed up in The Family. Dr. Ferdie Pacheco, who had been in The Champ's corner for every fight since he first won the title from Liston—except the last one—had gone on the Tom Snyder show and said that Muhammad was finished as a fighter, that he was a shadow of his former self, and that he (Pacheco) had done everything but beg Ali to retire even *before* the Spinks fight.

Pacheco had already been expelled from The Family for this heresy, but it had planted a seed of doubt that was hard to ignore. "The Doc" was no quack and he was also a personal friend; did he know something the others didn't? Was it even *possible* that The Champ was "washed up"? There was no way to think that by looking at him, or listening to him either. He looked sharp, talked sharp, and there was a calmness, a kind of muted intensity, in his confidence that made it sound almost understated.

Pat Patterson believed—or if he didn't, there was no way that even The Champ could guess it. The loyalty of those close to Muhammad Ali is so profound that it sometimes clouds their own vision.... But Leon Spinks had swept those clouds away, and now it was time to get serious. No more show business, no more clowning. Now they had come to the crunch.

PAT PATTERSON HAD TRIED NOT TO BROOD ON THESE things, but every newspaper rack he'd come close to in Chicago, New York or anywhere else seemed to echo the baying of hounds on a blood scent. Every media voice in the country was poised for ultimate revenge on this Uppity Nigger who had laughed in their faces for so long that a whole generation of sportswriters had grown up in the shadow of a mocking, dancing presence that most of them had never half-understood until now, when it seemed almost gone.

Even the rematch with Spinks was bogged down in the arcane politics of big-money boxing—and Pat Patterson, like all the others who had geared their lives to the fortunes of Muhammad Ali, understood that the rematch would have to be *soon*. Very soon. And The Champ would have to be *ready* this time—as he had not been ready in Vegas. There was no avoiding the memory of Sonny Liston's grim fate, after losing *again* to Ali in a fight that convinced even the "experts."

But Muhammad Ali was no Liston. There was magic in his head, as well as his fists and his feet—but time was not on his side, this time, and the only thing more important than slashing the Gordian Knot of boxing-industry politics that was already menacing the reality of a quick rematch with Spinks was the absolute necessity of making sure that The Champ would take this next fight as seriously as it was clearly going to be. A whole industry would be up for grabs—not to mention the fate of The Family—and the bizarre scenes of chaos and wild scrambling for position that had followed Spinks' first shocking upset would not be repeated if Ali lost the rematch.

Nobody was ready for Spinks' stunning victory in Vegas, but every power freak and leverage-monger with any real-life connection to boxing would be ready to go either way on this next one. There would be no more of this low-rent political bullshit about "recognition" by the World Boxing Council (WBC) or the World Boxing Association (WBA) if Ali lost the rematch with Leon—and no more big-money fights for Muhammad Ali, either. They would all be pushed over the brink that was already just a few steps in front of them—and no "comeback" would be likely, or even possible.

These things were among the dark shadows that Pat Patterson would rather not have been thinking about on that night in Manhattan as he walked down the corridor to his room in the Park Lane Hotel. The Champ had already convinced him that he would indeed be the first man in history to win the first Triple Crown in the history of heavyweight boxing—and Pat Patterson was far from alone in his conviction that Leon Spinks would be easy prey, next time, for a Muhammad Ali in top condition both mentally and physically. Spinks was vulnerable: the same crazy/mean style that made him dangerous also made him easy to hit. His hands were surprisingly fast, but his feet were as slow as Joe Frazier's and it was only the crafty coaching of his trainer, the ancient Sam Solomon, that had given him the early five-round edge in Las Vegas that Ali had refused to understand until he was so far behind that his only hope was a blazing last-minute assault and a knockout or at least a few knockdowns that he was too tired, in the end, to deliver.

Leon was dead on his feet in that savage fifteenth round—but so was Muhammad Ali, and that's why Spinks won the fight....

Yes...but that is no special secret and there will be plenty of time to deal with those questions of ego and strategy later on in this saga, if in fact we ever get there. The sun is up, the peacocks are screaming with lust, and this story is so far off the game plan that no hope of salvage exists at this time—or at least nothing less than a sweeping, all-points injunction by Judge Crater, who maintains an unlisted number so private that not even Bob Arum can reach him on short notice.

So we are left with the unhurried vision of Pat Patterson finally reaching the door of his room, number 905 in the Park Lane Hotel in Manhattan—and just as he pulls the room key out of his pocket on the way to a good night's sleep, his body goes suddenly stiff as he picks up the sound of raucous laughter and strange voices in room number 904.

Weird sounds from The Champ's suite....Impossible, but Pat Patterson *knows* he's stone sober and nowhere near deaf, so he drops his key back in his pocket and moves one step down the hallway, listening carefully now to these sounds he hopes are not really there....Hallucinations, bad nerves, almost anything but the sound of a totally unknown voice—and the voice of a "white devil," no doubt about that—from the room where Ali and Veronica are supposed to be sleeping peacefully. Bundini and Conrad had both promised to be gone at least an hour ago....But, no! Not this: not Bundini and Conrad and *the voice of some stranger, too*; along with the unmistakable sound of laughter from both The Champ and his wife .... Not *now*, just when things were getting close to intolerably serious.

What was the meaning?

Pat Patterson knew what he had to do: he planted both feet in the rug in front of 904 and *knocked*. Whatever was going on would have to be cut short at once, and it was his job to do the cutting—even if he had to get rude with Bundini and Conrad.

WELL...THIS NEXT SCENE IS SO STRANGE THAT NOT EVEN the people who were part of it can recount exactly what happened...but it went more or less like this: Bundini and I had just emerged from a strategy conference in the bathroom when we heard the sudden sound of knocking on the door. Bundini waved us all into silence as Conrad slouched nervously against the wall below the big window that looked out on the snow-covered wasteland of Central Park; Veronica was sitting fully clothed on the king-size bed right next to Ali, who was stretched out and relaxed with the covers pulled up to his waist, wearing nothing at all except....Well, let's take it again from Pat Patterson's view from the doorway, when Bundini answered his knock:

The first thing he saw when the door opened was a white stranger with a can of beer in one hand and a lit cigarette in the other, sitting cross-legged on the bureau that faced The Champ's bed—a bad omen for sure and a thing to be dealt with at once at this ominous point in time; but the next thing Pat Patterson saw turned his face into spastic wax and caused his body to leap straight back toward the doorway like he'd just been struck by lightning.

His professional bodyguard's eyes had fixed on me just long enough to be sure I was passive and with both hands harmlessly occupied for at least the few seconds it would take him to sweep the rest of the room and see what was wrong with his Five-Million-Dollars-an-hour responsibility... and I could tell by the way he moved into the room and the look on his face that I was suddenly back at that point where any movement at all or even the blink of an eye could change my life forever. But I also knew what was coming and I recall a split second of real fear as Pat Patterson's drop-forged glance swept past me and over to the bed to Veronica and the inert lump that lay under the sheets right beside her.

For an instant that frightened us all, the room was electric with absolute silence—and then the bed seemed to literally explode as the sheets flew away and a huge body with the hairy red face of the Devil himself leaped up like some jack-in-the-box out of hell and uttered a wild cry that jolted us all and sent such an obvious shock through Pat Patterson that he leaped backward and shot out both elbows like Kareem coming down with a rebound....

TO BE CONTINUED NEXT ISSUE

LAST TANGO IN VEGAS